

# A Major League Player in the Ecosystem

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A recent publication from the Pew Oceans Commission warns: "Half the U.S. population currently lives in the one-fifth of our land area along the coasts; by 2025, demographers anticipate three-quarters of the U.S. population will reside in coastal regions." The Commission further notes that if today's land consumption trends continue, the percentage of coastal acreage that has been developed will increase from 14 percent in 1997 to more than 25 percent by 2025. And these figures deal only with development impacts. What about degradation caused by invasive species and loss of wetlands due to sea level rise? The threats to the Meadowlands and other estuaries in our nation are both real and alarming. Few individuals understand



**A great blue heron stalking prey on a mudflat**



**A great egret and a black-crowned night heron at the water's edge**

Photographs USFWS / Gene Nieminen

Without the buffer of the Meadowlands, flood control, sea level rise and storm surges would become a nightmare. Development has already made flooding a problem. In his book *Fields of Sun and Grass*, John R. Quinn quotes George Fosdick, then mayor of Ridgefield Park, as commenting in the mid-1990s: "... since I was first elected commissioner in 1978, we've had, here in Ridgefield Park, three of what the Department of the Interior calls 'hundred-year floods'. ... To me, they're filling in all the places where the water used to run off and be absorbed ... ." In regard to sea level rise, a July 2001 report by the Columbia Earth Institute entitled *Climate Change and a Global City*, forecasts potential consequences that include wetland losses over the next 20 to 100 years in the NY / NJ Harbor Estuary. Flooding and sea level rise are not the only concerns. Landfilling and industry have greatly strained the Meadowlands' capacity to absorb pollution, reduced its acreage, and continued to dump even more contaminants.

With this in mind, concerned stakeholders increasingly pursue new and creative partnerships to protect the Hackensack Meadowlands. Vested stakeholders can accomplish habitat restoration and enhancement that are beyond the scope of what government can accomplish alone, a concept recognized as essential to restoration by the Father of Wildlife Management, Aldo Leopold, more than 50 years ago.

The consumer lifestyle and the priority we give to a strong economy place development pressure on natural resources. Our challenge is to protect and restore priority areas such as the Hackensack Meadowlands. These actions need to be integrated into the inevitable renewal of the area's urban infrastructure. The next time you drive the New Jersey Turnpike past the Meadowlands Sports Complex, take time to admire the other attraction, the expansive landscape inhabited by waterfowl, wading birds, raptors, songbirds, and communities of fish and shellfish that make the Meadowlands a major league estuary. Let's keep the home team healthy and bring the fans in to enjoy the experience.

the breadth of these threats, so one of the challenges in the NY / NJ Harbor Estuary is to increase public awareness of the need to conserve and restore those precious few natural resources, particularly large complexes such as the Hackensack Meadowlands.

How important, really, is the Meadowlands to the NY / NJ Harbor Estuary? Sports fans certainly make use of the area: both the NY Giants and Jets play at Giants Stadium in the Meadowlands Sports Complex. Other teams use the Complex as well. The Meadowlands is in the major leagues when it comes to sports. But environmentally?

If the 130 acres that the Complex has paved over for parking were extended to include the whole of the Meadowlands, how would the entire estuary be affected? Certainly, all the species that reproduce in, and depend on, the complex of uplands and wetlands would be deprived of habitat. Migratory birds, that spend a relatively small but vital

portion of the year resting and feeding in the Meadowlands, and even species that simply use the area for foraging, would have to find other sources of sustenance. Clearly, an immense segment of both the flora and the fauna would be gone forever. Just as importantly, without this significant natural land base the opportunity to pursue habitat restoration and enhancement would be lost.

In the mid-1990s, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Coastal Program Office worked with a large number of dedicated partners to document the crucial importance of the Hackensack Meadowlands to local, regional, and national populations of fish, wildlife, and native vegetation in the report entitled *Significant Habitats and Habitat Complexes of the New York Bight Watershed*. Since publication and distribution, those committed to conserving the area have used the report as a foundation to counter attempts to send this remnant of a once vast habitat complex into the realm of asphalt and concrete. But what of the future?